

**The Ramakrishna Mission
Institute of Culture Library**

Presented by

Dr. Baridbaran Mukerji

11479

On Maeterlinck :
or Notes on the
Study of Symbols,
Etc.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

AND UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

MAETERLINCK'S SYMBOLISM :

THE BLUE BIRD

LONDON : A. C. FIFIELD, 13, CLIFFORD'S INN, E.C.

On Maeterlinck :
or Notes on the
Study of Symbols,
with special reference to *The
Blue Bird*. To which is
added an exposition of *The
Sightless*. By Henry Rose.

London : A. C. Fifield, 13
Clifford's Inn, E.C. 1911.

R.M.I.C. LIBRARY	
Acc. No.	11479
Class No.	
Date	
	✓
	✓
	✓
Bk. Card	✓
Checked	aw

Contents

	Page
On Maeterlinck : or Notes on the Study of Symbols	II
On "The Sightless" : Maeterlinck's Picture of a Religious Crisis . .	III

WE live within the shadow of a veil that no man's hand can lift. Some are born near it, as it were, and pass their lives striving to peer through its web, catching now and again visions of inexplicable things; but some of us live so far from the veil that we not only deny its existence, but delight in mocking those who perceive what we cannot.

.

It has been affirmed in print, by one possibly unconscious of his own malformation, that Maurice Maeterlinck is a hopeless mental cripple. It has also been written that a certain work of his is a masterpiece pure and eternal, sufficient of itself to immortalise his name, "a name that must ever be blessed by those who hunger after what is great and beautiful." Both critics were eminent and sincere.

LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA.

THE greater and more thoughtful the artists,
the more they delight in symbolism, and the
more fearlessly they employ it.

RUSKIN, in *Modern Painters*.

Forewords

MANY years ago I heard a story of a musician who had a very promising pupil to whom he gave an exercise of a difficult but comprehensive character, requesting him to practise this exercise daily for a very long time. The pupil complied quite diligently with the instructions of his teacher, but a day came when he felt very tired of the continual repetition of the exercise, and asked to have another one given to him. The reply which the musician made was in effect, "You can now choose your own exercise. You are so efficient in the one that I gave you that you are able to play anything."

Probably the story is not true. None the less, it serves to illustrate a statement which I am about to make. I do not suggest that M. Maeterlinck's play, *The Blue Bird*, considered as a subject for

Forewords

study by the inquirer into symbolism, is altogether similar to the exercise of the musician above referred to. But it is, in my opinion, a much more important work than has yet been generally recognised. And the student who pursues this branch of art and literature will certainly find, if he masters the symbolism of *The Blue Bird*, not only that he will have entered into the right understanding of a charming allegory, but that the task of interpreting other works of like character has become much easier to him.

I offer this as my justification for again taking up this subject, and for inviting the reader's attention to a few hints on the interpretation of symbols which, though they have reference more especially to *The Blue Bird*, are, nevertheless, in many respects of general application.

H.R.

LONDON, *November 1st, 1911.*

On Maeterlinck :

The Study of Symbols

Chapter I

Natural Symbols—Arbitrary or Accidental Symbols—
Examples from Christian Art—A Picture Language.

IN supplementing, as I here propose to do, the exposition which I published some time ago on the subject of "Maeterlinck's Symbolism," especially with reference to *The Blue Bird*, it may be advisable that first I should make some observations on symbolism in general.

Broadly speaking, symbols may be divided into two classes :

Natural symbols, and
Arbitrary or accidental symbols.

A natural symbol is one which derives

On Maeterlinck:

its significance or force primarily from some inherent quality or property of the object or thing used as symbol, which quality or property of itself helps to create a certain association of ideas.

An arbitrary or accidental symbol is one which depends, not on some inherent quality or property of the object or thing used as symbol, but upon an association of ideas which, as it were by chance, has given this object or thing symbolic value.

Let me, to make my meaning more clear, invite attention to one or two illustrations.

Probably the most conspicuous examples of natural symbols which we can name are those used to symbolise the Supreme Being.

In early ages one of the most universal symbols of the Supreme Being was the sun, which, indeed, became, obviously for reasons which were connected with observation of the sun's place and influence in Nature, an object of worship to many members of the human family, as, though in lesser degree, it remains to this day.

The Study of Symbols

This is a natural symbol of the highest order. For the sun is the great creative and sustaining agent of the universe—the source both of light and of heat, the two chief forces in physical life, which themselves are typical of intelligence and love, the two chief forces in spiritual life.

In most branches of the Christian Church a Trinitarian conception of the Supreme Being, of the Godhead, has prevailed. This has given rise to the adoption of a variety of symbols to express the different Persons of the Trinity and the qualities which in Christian teaching are associated with each of them.

The First Person in the Trinity, the Father, is represented by a hand—like the sun, a natural symbol of creative and sustaining power. It is represented also by an eye, a symbol more especially of the omniscience of the Divine Being.

Frequently the hand and the eye are shown with sun-like or star-like radiations as a sort of background. And there are several cases in which the Supreme Being

On Maeterlinck :

is represented by the word YAHWEH (Jehovah) written in Hebrew characters in the centre of a device which definitely possesses the sun-like character.

That these solar devices are not merely conventional ornamentation, but have resulted from the partial adoption in the Christian Church of the more ancient symbol of the Supreme Power, the sun, is extremely probable. Not a few of the symbols in use in the Christian Church were, like some of the details of ritual which still are observed, in use in pre-Christian times. And where there was no serious risk of confusion of religious teaching and thought, they wisely were continued.

In some instances the artists of Christian times were uncertain, however, as to the course which they should adopt. And since the sun, which was eminently suited to be an emblem of the Godhead, had actually become an object of worship to countless multitudes of the human race, artists grew to be cautious in the symbolic use of it. They were cautious,

The Study of Symbols

but not wholly averse. Owing partly, it may be assumed, to the instinctive recognition of the inherent properties of the great luminary and partly to usage or tradition the adoption of the symbol has persisted.

The Second Person of the Trinity is sometimes represented by a lamb. This, again, is a natural symbol. For the qualities of innocence and love which Christians especially recognise in Him whom they call the Son of God are accepted as distinctive of the creature which is thus used symbolically.

The Third Person of the Trinity is sometimes represented by a bird, the dove—yet another natural symbol. Sometimes this Person is represented by a roll or a book.

The statements of authorities as to the use of the dove to symbolise the Holy Spirit are somewhat confused and obscure. We have an example of this in the case of Cruden, who, in his *Concord-*

On Maeterlinck :

ance, says : "The dove is the symbol of simplicity and innocency. The Holy Spirit appeared at the baptism of our Saviour in the form of a dove to signify what Christ is to them that come to Him, viz. meek, harmless, and loving." . The logical effect of this presentation of the symbol is to make the dove expressive of the qualities of Christ, the Second Person, and not definitely of the Third Person at all ; in other words, to provide an additional symbol for the Second Person.

Obviously, if we are to find an explanation of the adoption of the dove as the symbol of the Third Person, and of the persistence of that symbol in Christian art, we must seek for it in another direction than that suggested by Cruden and many other commentators. I admit that the subject is controversial, but, in my opinion, we shall best arrive at an understanding of the meaning and use of this symbol when first we consider the distinctive teaching of the Christian Church in relation to the Third Person of the

The Study of Symbols

Trinity, and then certain distinctive features or properties of the bird.

The Third Person of the Trinity is variously regarded and described in Christian teaching, but, speaking generally, Christians of Trinitarian views recognise in this Person the highest attributes of truth and goodness of which they are able to conceive. It is the dwelling of this Holy Spirit in Man which puts him in accord with the Divine.

Bearing these facts of Christian teaching in mind, let us ask ourselves, What are the distinctive features or properties of the bird? In its power to go to its destination in a perfectly straight way; still more, in its power to ascend, to dwell in the light of the sun, and to breathe at high altitudes, the bird is the possessor of natural qualities and attributes which peculiarly accord with those spiritual qualities which we associate with truth. Hence, truth in the Third Person of the Trinity is represented by the bird, and goodness—in which mercy and

On Maeterlinck :

peace are included — by the particular kind of bird chosen as the symbol, the dove.

Where the roll or book is employed as the symbol the significance is similar to that of the bird. The roll or the book represents, however, truth actually vouchsafed and recorded—a process assumed peculiarly to result from the influence and operation of the Third Person in the Godhead, the Great Source of Inspiration.

In relation to this branch of symbolism it is important to bear in mind that the first Biblical reference to the dove which we have relates to the bird in its double character as the bearer of tidings of truth and the bearer of tidings of goodness. It was the return of the dove to the ark with the olive branch in its mouth which, in the Biblical account, is described as having conveyed to Noah at one and the same time the tidings that the waters of the Flood were abating and that Divine wrath was assuaged.

This early introduction of the dove in

The Study of Symbols

the Biblical story and the part which it was represented to have played had much to do with the ultimate adoption of the bird as one of the most conspicuous of Christian symbols and with the specific meaning which has been attached to it ever since.¹

These examples which I have given are examples of natural symbols. A most conspicuous example of an arbitrary or

¹ Since I wrote the above references to the symbolism of the dove I have met with the following passage in an article on "Spiritual Reality in Progressive Buddhism," which appeared in *The Quest* (Vol. II, page 707), from the pen of the editor, Mr. G. R. S. Mead. "The Prajñā or Gnōsis of Buddhism, sublime as is its ideal of perfect spiritual knowledge, was but one wing, so to say, of the Great Bird or Vehicle of the Bodhi, or Supreme Enlightenment—the Heavenly Dove of Buddhism. The other wing of the Holy Spirit, of the Law of Truth, or Vital Reality, is Love." Literally speaking, there is no Heavenly Dove of Buddhism. Mr. Mead is here using the language of Christian symbolism to express Buddhist conceptions. But it is extremely interesting to observe that in doing so he has associated with the dove a significance which virtually is identical with that which I have ascribed to it.

On Maeterlinck :

accidental symbol is that with which we are familiar also in the Christian Church, the cross. Two pieces of wood bisecting each other at right angles have not in themselves any profound significance. Yet, a tremendous incident in human history, the fact that two crossed pieces of wood such as this were used as a gibbet in the execution of the Founder of a great religion, has invested this very elementary mechanical contrivance with more significance than any other emblem in use in the Eastern hemisphere. It has become to the Christian the great emblem of love, sacrifice, and redemption.

Another example of an arbitrary or accidental symbol is the olive branch, to which reference has just been made. For had the dove been described as having returned to the ark with some other branch than that of the olive, that other branch would have had the place which the olive possesses as a symbol of assuaged wrath and of peace.

These illustrations will serve to show what I mean by natural symbols and

The Study of Symbols

what I mean by arbitrary or accidental symbols.

In passing, it may be observed that some symbols are of a compound character, i.e. both natural and arbitrary or accidental. For example, so far as in the representation of the Second Person of the Trinity by the lamb the idea of sacrifice is associated with the idea of innocence, the symbol may, in its sacrificial aspect, be classed as arbitrary or accidental. For the use of the lamb as an object of sacrifice, which gave rise to this element of symbolism, must be considered to have been local or national. In any case, the idea of sacrifice might have been so determined by custom as to have become not less vividly connected with some other creature.

I need not follow up this subsidiary feature of definition, however. It is possible for me now to bring to a focus what I wish here more especially to express.

Whilst the cross owes its peculiar potency as a symbol to a purely accidental cause, and could never have had this

On Maeterlinck :

potency by virtue of any inherent property of its own ; whilst men the world over, if they had taken the trouble to fix their attention on such a contrivance at all, might, but for the accidental cause to which I have referred, have gazed at it until the end of time without finding it express anything more than the elementary skill of a carpenter in putting two bits of wood together ; whilst, too, the olive branch owes its potency as a symbol equally to an accidental circumstance—it may, on the other hand, confidently be said that scores of thoughtful men, widely separated, and having no communication with one another, could not possibly have contemplated the sun without perceiving in that luminary, because of its natural properties, a fitting symbol of creative and sustaining power. Neither could they have considered the hand without recognising in that member a fitness for similar symbolic use ; or the eye without seeing in it an expressive type of the Divine omniscience. In like manner they could not have contemplated

The Study of Symbols

the lamb without feeling it to be a fitting symbol of innocence and love, or the bird without finding it well adapted to be a symbol of truth.

Such is the virtue of natural symbols. They have in themselves such definiteness and universality that they form a sort of picture language for men of open eyes wherever those men may be.

Chapter II

Spiritual Basis of Natural Symbols—Structure of *The Blue Bird*—Comparison with a Gothic Cathedral.

IN the inquiry upon which I am now engaged I am not much concerned with arbitrary or accidental symbols. Having drawn the attention of the reader to the broad difference between the two classes of symbols, I desire him to bear in mind more especially the distinctive character of natural symbols.

The more vital symbols which are used by M. Maeterlinck—vital as regards the meaning and interpretation of his work—are of the natural and not of the arbitrary or accidental kind ; we are helped to the understanding of his philosophic aim by a consideration of the inherent natural qualities of many of the characters which he depicts, of many of the Animals, Things, and Elements which he personifies, or to

The Study of Symbols

which he refers, and of many of the scenes which he presents.

In this connection I may recall that in *Maeterlinck's Symbolism*, in showing that Maeterlinck's play, *The Blue Bird*, is primarily an allegory of Man's search for spiritual truth, I point out that much of the symbolism of Maeterlinck is based on lines which accord with Swedenborg's Science or Doctrine of Correspondences.

It is not my purpose to trouble the reader with what might seem to be dry-as-dust details as to the teaching of Swedenborg on this subject. But this much I may venture to say: when I have been referring to natural symbols I have been indicating a class of symbols which *in the degree of their quality as natural symbols* are also, in accordance with the doctrine of Swedenborg, Correspondential.

Were it my business here to develop an explanation of Swedenborg's theory I would have to show that Swedenborg dealt with this branch of symbolism in a peculiarly scientific and ample fashion. It was part of his work to indicate how it

On Maeterlinck :

is that specific natural objects have specific symbolic values, so much so as to stand definitely for specific spiritual ideas.

The theory of Swedenborg on this subject all turns on the teaching that spirit is antecedent to matter ; that there is nothing which is visible to our bodily senses which is not resultant from spirit ; that the spiritual, universally and continuously, flows into the natural, giving to the natural its form and character, and hence that in the general and in the particular all natural things correspond with, are correspondences of the spiritual forces or influences which flow into them, and from which they derive their essential properties.

At once we see that, from the point of view of the student who works on the basis of this doctrine, natural objects have all the character not merely of what I have called a picture language, but of a spiritual language. To such a student all things are charged with symbolic values, and particular things with particular values, according to the degree of his

The Study of Symbols

knowledge or perception or intuition of the spiritual forces of which they are the expression on the plane of physical Nature. To put the matter in another way, this student enters into the possession of a spiritual language in which the words, so to speak, are natural objects used as symbols. These objects he accepts as symbols of spiritual ideas. And not only do they stand for those ideas to him, but they do so likewise to others who have similar knowledge to himself of this rather recondite, but, to the initiated, highly helpful and intensely absorbing science.

With this explanation before him the reader will now perceive, at any rate, the point of view from which, and the method in which, I have approached the interpretation of *The Blue Bird*. I do not expect to secure universal conviction as to the merits of this method. None the less, the more generous and liberal-minded amongst my readers probably will accept my statement when I say that when I, a student of Swedenborg, take up the

On Maeterlinck :

work of Maeterlinck, another student of Swedenborg, I find that Maeterlinck uses not a few symbols, and amongst them some of his leading symbols, as Swedenborg would have used them, and that these particular symbols are not only natural symbols, but are what Swedenborg would have called Correspondential.

It is for these reasons or from these causes that I am able the better to discern the use to which Maeterlinck puts them. And I claim that, discerning the purport of the symbols in this work which are natural and at the same time Correspondential, I am able by their aid to fit in many of the symbols which are not Correspondential in Swedenborg's sense of the term, and, finally, that I am able by these means to arrive at a consistent and illuminating interpretation of the work as a whole.

What I find is that Maeterlinck provides a complete framework which is suited to and intended for the presentation of an allegory of Man's search for spiritual truth. This framework is made up of

The Study of Symbols

the series of scenes and the main incidents of his play. Into it he puts certain characters and certain references and allusions which set forth his main theme. Having done this he fills in details with perfect freedom, aiming in this respect to impart to his play as far as possible the colloquial elements which pertain to the conventional fairy story, and to give facilities for much of the stage business which adds to the charm of such a story when put on the boards.

It would be idle and foolish to suggest that every speech, word, or incident in the play has symbolic significance. *The Blue Bird* is not so entirely symbolic, the symbolism does not reach so much into the smallest details as to make the work a rival in this department of literature with, say, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which, considered as a work of art—I say nothing as to its theology—is one of the most complete and consistent allegories ever penned. The symbolism of *The Blue Bird* goes very much farther, however, than may appear on a merely superficial study

On Maeterlinck

of the work. And certainly there is nothing in the colloquial elements and in the provision for stage business which is contradictory of the main theme.

Excepting that *The Blue Bird* is the work of a single man whilst the old Gothic cathedral was the work of many, the structure of Maeterlinck's play might well be compared to one of those great products of architectural genius in which in combination with a dominant idea and a simple plan which governs the entire work there is much freedom of detailed treatment and execution. As a piece of literature *The Blue Bird* is noble Gothic.

11479.

Chapter III

Unity in Nature—The Universal Element in Symbols
—The Bird as a Symbol of Happiness—The
Bird as a Symbol of Truth.

HAVING now explained to the best of my power the point of view from which I approached the interpretation of *The Blue Bird*, I wish to refer to one or two specific features in that interpretation and especially to what I may call the governing symbols of the play. But before I do this it is necessary for me to recur for a moment to what I have said on the subject of natural symbols.

Whilst I have spoken of certain natural objects or things as peculiarly fitted from their inherent qualities or properties to be the symbols of certain ideas, I have not thereby intended to imply that those objects or things are to be conceived of alone as symbols of the ideas which I indicate—that they may not be conceived

On Maeterlinck :

of as having any other significance. There is unity in Nature. It follows from the recognition of this fact that whilst we may attribute some peculiar symbolic value to a particular natural object or thing, and whilst we may be assured that there is nothing in the whole realm of Nature that better serves the purpose, and whilst we may even go so far as to say that this object or thing, whatever it may be, is in Swedenborg's sense of the term Correspondential, we must also be prepared to admit, if we are to treat this subject scientifically, that the same object or thing, though in lesser degree, may have other symbolic uses. Similarly, and indeed as a consequence of the adoption of this view, we must recognise that a particular idea may be symbolised by many things, possibly by myriads of things besides the one which we accept and use as peculiarly fitted for our purpose.

For example, whilst I speak of the bird as eminently suitable from its natural properties and qualities to be an emblem of truth, and whilst I speak of a particular

The Study of Symbols

kind of bird as in Swedenborg's sense a Correspondence of spiritual truth, I am bound to recognise many other emblems of truth besides the bird. There is indeed one property of truth which the bird cannot be said to symbolise at all. This is the cleansing property. The cleansing property of truth is fitly symbolised by water. Hence the use of water in baptism.

And just as there are other emblems of truth besides the bird, the bird on its part may symbolise other things besides truth. It has by certain interpreters of Maeterlinck's play, *The Blue Bird*, been said to symbolise happiness. From the fact that the bird is a beautiful thing, difficult to catch, and alluring in its character, it is indeed quite a good symbol of happiness. Its love of song, and its freedom of movement too, similarly distinguish it. Was it not these features which appealed to James Hogg when, in a poem on the skylark, he wrote :

Bird of the wilderness,
Blithesome and cumberless,

On Maeterlinck :

Sweet be thy matin o'er moorland and lea !
Emblem of happiness,
Blest is thy dwelling-place—
Oh to abide in the desert with thee !

The Psalmist anticipated in some measure the thought of this poem when he sang, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest."

Yes, the bird is really a very beautiful symbol of happiness. *But whether in the interpretation of a particular work of art or literature in which the bird is used symbolically we view it in what I regard as its primary meaning as signifying truth or in its relatively secondary meaning as signifying happiness, must depend upon our perception of the general purpose of the artist or author, and upon the way in which we find that a particular use is found to fit in with, to harmonise with, the work as a whole.* When, as is the case with a work of art like *The Blue Bird*, quite a mass of symbols is employed, if we are to give the writer credit for mastery, if we are to suppose that he is something else than a charlatan or a bungler, we must look for the ele-

The Study of Symbols

ment of unity in the production, we must treat his various symbols in relation to each other, and accept the interpretation which is not only the loftiest, but is the one which, after all the parts of the work have been correlated, best explains the presence of those parts in the complete picture.

It is this which I claim to have done in the case of Maeterlinck's play.

Chapter IV

Leading Symbols of *The Blue Bird*—The Riddle of
“the grass that sings”—Risks of Blind Alleys
and Tangles.

NOW to consider a few specific symbols. The question arises, What are the symbols belonging to the natural as distinct from the arbitrary or accidental kind to which I point as chiefly demanding our attention in any attempt that we may make to interpret *The Blue Bird*?

Obviously in the forefront of these symbols we must put the children, for Tytyl and Mytyl are both symbolic. Similarly we must give a foremost place to the Blue Bird itself, for it is after this bird that the play is named—a sufficient indication of the importance which the author attributes to it. The bird is the great object of the search which the play was written to allegorise. And, though the bird is so little seen, all the action

The Study of Symbols

depends upon it. The play without the bird would be as *Hamlet* without the Prince, were such a thing possible.

Also in the foremost rank of the symbols come "the grass that sings," the other object of search ; the fairy diamond, a prime aid in the search, and Light, who is designated as guide to the children.

These which I have named are symbols of the very first order, symbols which I class as natural, and which, were it my purpose to fully develop that aspect of my inquiry, I should also define as Correspondential. I believe that in the whole range of symbolism Maeterlinck could not have found symbols more suited than these are to take the commanding place in his allegory which is assigned to them, or more suited to be used in combination for the purpose of developing his theme.

Secondary, but still important from the point of view with which I am dealing, are Night and the structure of Night's Palace, the birds in Night's Palace which, when caught, are found to be dead, and the Cat. I call them secondary because

On Maeterlinck :

I think that without any great difficulty the author could have found other symbols to express effectively the ideas for which these stand. Nevertheless they are good symbols which come within the natural category as I have defined it. And they are also more or less definitely Correspondential.

When we pass to the Dog, to the Forest with its Trees and Animals, to the Graveyard, and to the Kingdom of the Future, not to speak of other features which I mention in my essay, we get a number of symbols which, as used by the author, are composite, partly natural symbols and partly arbitrary or accidental. They are poetic images which help to illustrate the meaning of the play, and have a useful place in the development of the action, but are not of such vital importance in the author's scheme as the symbols which I previously named.

In my essay on *Maeterlinck's Symbolism* I give a connected exposition of the meaning of the whole of the symbols which I have just referred to. It is apart from

The Study of Symbols

my present purpose to repeat that exposition here, further than to say that I point to the children as types of Humanity, as symbolic of Humanity in that state of innocence and with that desire for knowledge which are favourable to the attainment of spiritual things. As stated already, I find the Blue Bird to be the symbol of spiritual truth. I find "the grass that sings" to be the symbol of scientific truth, that the diamond stands for spiritual light, and that the person of the play whom we know as Light stands for human reason, intelligence, and knowledge.

For a more full explanation of the meaning of these primary symbols, and also for information as to the meaning of the symbols which I class as secondary and of those which I put in a lesser category, I must refer the reader to the essay named. There is one of the primary symbols to which I desire to recur, however, partly in order that I may further emphasise the importance of the symbol itself, and partly in order that I may

On Maeterlinck :

impress on the reader the fact that, in the attempt to interpret an allegorical work like *The Blue Bird*, unless we start with the right clue, we are bound to encounter all sorts of difficulties, to get, so to speak, into blind alleys or find ourselves in tangles. The symbol to which I refer is "the grass that sings."

"The grass that sings" is not once mentioned after its first introduction in the play. Hence, despite its great significance, it is apt to be overlooked. As I have just stated, it is the symbol of scientific truth, the truth that is related to Man's material well-being. In my essay I call attention to the fact that with regard to this truth the Fairy says, "I can do without the grass that sings, at a pinch, but I absolutely must have the Blue Bird." I observe that by this is meant that, though the knowledge of the advanced forms of physical science is good, it is of relatively little importance to Man's higher spiritual needs : it is not to be compared for real serviceableness with the truth which is spiritual and of

The Study of Symbols

which our perception may be clear though our knowledge of the physical sciences be no greater than was that of the simple fishermen who were the first disciples.

In giving this interpretation in my essay I remark, "Of the many critics of this play, not one, so far as I have been able to discover, has ventured so much as a guess as to what Maeterlinck means" by this symbol. The fact was that no attempt had been made by expositors of the play to suggest a meaning for "the grass that sings," because, since they started out with the theory that the play symbolised first and foremost the pursuit of happiness and that it symbolised very little else, it was not possible for them to satisfactorily explain "the grass that sings" at all.

It is interesting to know that since my little book was published one critic, at any rate, has made an attempt of his own to explain this most peculiar of Maeterlinck's symbols. I am glad that he has done so, for he has provided me with as good a proof as I could possibly wish for

On Maeterlinck :

in support of my present argument as to the necessity for starting with the right clue in the effort to interpret a work of this kind. In a brief communication to me he said, "Of course, 'the grass that sings' is a symbol of the joyous aspect which Nature presents to the happy mind."

A more probable explanation could not possibly have suggested itself to any person with whom the idea that *The Blue Bird* is merely an allegory of Man's search for happiness was dominant. But does it bear close analysis ?

The reply which I made to this critic was, "If 'the grass that sings' is a symbol of the joyous aspect which Nature presents to the happy mind, will you please explain the relevance in that case of the Fairy's remark, 'I can do without the grass that sings, at a pinch' ? For, if the Blue Bird on its part is above all things the symbol of happiness, and if this bird, which the Fairy says she absolutely *must* have, should be found, there could be no question of doing without 'the grass that sings' at

The Study of Symbols

all. Happiness, in that event, must have entered into the very soul of the seekers, and the joyous aspect of Nature would present itself to them as it were automatically ; there could be no doing without it 'at a pinch' or under any other condition."

To this comment I received no reply. And, indeed, none of any logical worth is possible.

Chapter V

Happiness merely derivative—Its Dependence on
Right Perception, Intuition, and Knowledge—
How illustrated in “the Palace of Happiness”—
The Gospel of Duty—The Gospel of Love.

IN *Maeterlinck's Symbolism* I observe that, whilst it is quite true that the Blue Bird in Maeterlinck's play of that name stands for happiness, as the play-bill informs us, it does so only in a secondary sense. I remark, “Primarily, the Blue Bird is not the symbol of happiness. But just as from bread we get sustenance, from celestial truth, which is what the Blue Bird typifies, happiness may be derived.”

In a forthcoming second edition of my book, referring to this statement, I say, “To perceive rightly the bearing of Maeterlinck's symbolism in this particular we have to remember that happiness is merely derivative ; it is not an initial

The Study of Symbols

cause, but an effect. Happiness, in the sense in which Maeterlinck thinks of it—happiness as distinct from false joy or sensual pleasure—depends on right perception, intuition, and knowledge: on the degree of our apprehension of truth and on conduct in harmony therewith. Or it may also depend—and this may be assumed to be the case with children and all who are in a state of innocence—on our unconscious relation to ‘the truth of things,’ to use one of Maeterlinck’s own phrases.”

To those who are interested in following the course of Maeterlinck’s thought in this branch of his teaching I cannot do better than commend a careful study of “The Palace of Happiness,” the new act which Maeterlinck wrote for the revival of *The Blue Bird* at the Haymarket Theatre in December, 1910.

Correlating this new act with the rest of the play, we may see that whilst in the Forest scene, by which in the printed version of the play this act is preceded, the hindrances to human progress which are interposed by the conservatism

On Maeterlinck :

and love of power of ecclesiastical and secular authorities are symbolised, we have now placed before us symbols of the many temptations to evil and inducements to good which life offers. Wrong aims of life are sharply contrasted with right aims, false joys with true joys ; the gospel of duty is affirmed, and, still more, the gospel of love. Light is heard to exclaim, "A man should know how to sacrifice something to the duty which he is performing." Maternal love, one of the highest types of love, here is extolled.

The love of the earthly mother does not readily expand, however, to the love of Humanity ; sometimes it is all too restricted to the circle of the natural relationships which are its first concern. It is the embryo of a larger love, but an embryo that does not always develop. Hence in this act we hear of, though we do not see, a yet greater love, a love which is universal, named by the author "the Great Joy of Loving." In referring to this Great Joy, one of the Happinesses remarks to Tytyl, "Do what you

The Study of Symbols

will, you are ever so much too small to see her altogether."

The picture which the author gives of false pleasures, the Luxuries, as he calls them, is extremely impressive, and reminds us, as, indeed, does the whole act, of the best work of the mediæval writers of miracle plays. "They are dangerous and would break your will," says Light to Tytyl when Tytyl is tempted to partake of the riotous feast in which the Luxuries are engaged. But the more carnal appetites in Man are strong. Pressingly invited by the Luxury of Being Rich, some of the humbler companions of the children join the festive board. Even the Dog, whose instincts hitherto had been true, and whose companionship in the search for the Blue Bird had been helpful, falls for the moment under the evil spell. The children then are thrown back on the guidance and protection of Light. If reason, intelligence, and knowledge—of which Light is the symbol—were now to fail them, their plight would be desperate

On Maeterlinck :

indeed. Fat Laughter tries to assail even these higher attributes. Whilst the Luxuries, uttering cries of delight, try to drag Tytyl and Mytyl to the table, Fat Laughter seizes Light vigorously round the waist.

Then is a peril which outwardly seems greater than has ever been met with since the search for the Blue Bird began. But, if Tytyl whilst in the Forest, without the company of Light, forgot at the needful moment to use the fairy diamond he and his companions now have Light with them, and may, in fact, readily be protected. When by the direction of Light the diamond is turned, all the Luxuries vanish at once.

It is significant—though here I make no comment upon it—that in the company of the Luxuries, which includes the Luxury of Satisfied Vanity, the Luxury of Knowing Nothing, the Luxury of Understanding Nothing, the Luxury of Doing Nothing, and many of like character, Maeterlinck puts the Luxury of Being a Landowner !

The Study of Symbols

Twice in this act we have allusions which, in my opinion, should be sufficient even in themselves to stamp the play as an allegory of Man's search for celestial or spiritual truth. When the diamond is turned upon the Luxuries, when spiritual light is shed upon them, and the Luxuries, revealed in all their naked ugliness, rush off to the shelter of darkness in the Cave of the Miseries, and when in place of the sensuous banquet-hall we see what the author describes as a cathedral of gladness and serenity, Tytyl wonders at the transformation and asks, "Where are we?" To this inquiry : Light replies, "We have not moved : it is your eyes that see differently. ' We now behold the truth of things ; and we shall perceive the souls of the Joys that endure the brightness of the diamond."

Again, near the end of the act, when the pure Joys embrace Light—Light, who is now veiled, because the time is not yet come when Man can have the fullest development of reason and intelligence of

On Maeterlinck :

which he is capable, or can enter into all knowledge—the Joy of Understanding expresses the natural yearning of the soul for further advancement. She exclaims, “Come, sister, come ; we are strong enough, we are pure enough. Put aside those veils which still conceal from us the last truths and the last happinesses.”

Thus is the character of the work as an allegory primarily of Man’s search for truth again affirmed. It is truth always first, then happiness.

And here we must not neglect to observe that in the part of the play from which I have just quoted the Joy of Understanding adds, “You are our queen and our reward.” When with the aid of the spiritual light which the diamond symbolises all things are seen in their true aspects, and reason and intelligence have been brought into free exercise, and the higher knowledge, though not necessarily the highest, has been attained, Man is no longer subject but regnant. And, of course—who can think otherwise?—such attainment is itself the re-

The Study of Symbols

ward of the long and patient strife ; happiness in every form attends it.

Those students of Maeterlinck who are interested in his religious views may observe that in this act there is one of those references to a Supreme Power which are somewhat rare in his writings, presumably because of his judicious avoidance of dogmatic teaching. It is a reference which both in itself and its context is peculiarly reminiscent of New Testament language. When Light explains her inability to comply with the request made to her for the removal of the veils which partly hide her, she says, "Sisters, my beautiful sisters, I am obeying my Master. The hour is not yet come ; it will strike, perhaps, and I shall return without fear and without shadow. Farewell ; rise and let us kiss once more, like sisters lost and found, while waiting for the day that will soon appear."

I have but one thing to add before I conclude my reference to this act. Readers of *The Blue Bird* who imagine that in this play Maeterlinck gives us an

On Maeterlinck

allegory merely, or chiefly, of Man's search for happiness will do well to reflect on one simple fact. Although in the new act the author brings us even to the Palace of Happiness, and, after the illusory pleasures have been banished, shows us countless forms of happiness, and, in the end, joy so great that it is dissolved in tears ; although at the close of the act the curtain descends on a hush of silence, for the happiness which all feel is too great to be expressed in words, the Blue Bird remains still an object of search !

Chapter VI

Elusiveness of the Blue Bird—Apprehensions of Truth
merely Relative—Spiritual Light in Relation to
Human Reason—Knowledge as a Menace to
Evil.

IN the study of *The Blue Bird* a point naturally arises of which it is now necessary to speak. Readers of the play may have been a little perplexed at the very elusive descriptions of the Blue Bird, of the bird of the search, which Maeterlinck gives. The bird of the dream never comes into the hands of Tytyl and Mytyl at all. They have a glimpse of it in the Forest. And when they are hurrying away from the anger of old Time, in the Kingdom of the Future, Light is heard to exclaim, "I have the Blue Bird. It is hidden under my cloak." But later on, in the scene of the Awakening, Tytyl says that having seen the bird which Light had under her cloak he

On Maeterlinck :

found that it was not blue but quite pink. Pink, as I have elsewhere remarked, is, at any rate, a colour of promise. There have been times when Tytyl thought that he had the Blue Bird, but found that his supposed Blue Bird was black. •

Now we must not suppose that Maeterlinck intends to suggest that the bird which Light had under her cloak and which was afterwards found to be pink was not all the while the true bird. In other words, we must not suppose that Light, Light whom the fairy Berylune had appointed as guide to the children, and who had performed her office faithfully, was herself deluded as to the bird which was in her possession.

In all this elusiveness as to the colour of the bird and as to the difficulty of obtaining possession of it, Maeterlinck has in mind that absolute truth is in the Divine Spirit alone. Man's apprehensions of that truth never can be other than relative, and they vary according to the changes and transitions of his spiritual state. In times of spiritual exaltation

The Study of Symbols

the truth appears to him in aspects which assure him of his higher relationship to the Divine. And when his greater nearness to the Divine is realised, when his consciousness of advancement is more vivid and the aspect of truth is more definite, then it is that the bird which in the figurative teaching of Maeterlinck is chosen as the symbol of truth—a bird of the existence of which Man may have intimations, a bird of which he may sometimes have glimpses, but which he never has really in his grasp—appears as blue.

Only by a very close and sympathetic study of this play can we be able to perceive with what consummate art and thorough consistency Maeterlinck has worked out the details of his various scenes and incidents with the object of illustrating all this—with the object of presenting a faithful allegory of Man's search for that which is highest and best, the truth that ever endures and is essential to Man's perfect freedom and the only source of real happiness.

And with what aptness are the leading

On Maeterlinck :

symbols chosen, and how ingeniously combined. What, for example, could be happier and more expressive than the association of the fairy diamond and of the soul of the lamp, of Light? This association is a very important feature of the symbolism of the play.

As I point out in my essay, the personage Light, so prominent in the play, is "complementary" to the fairy diamond : the one symbolises spiritual light and the other human reason, intelligence, and knowledge.

Human reason, intelligence, and knowledge are not in themselves sufficient for the search for celestial truth. Spiritual light also is needful, nay is essential for the search. However perfect the natural eye may be it cannot perceive objects in the dark : the rays of light must first play upon the retina. In like manner, however gifted we may be with faculties of mental vision and with knowledge, spiritual light, which corresponds with physical light, must illumine the objects, or subjects, to which that vision is directed

The Study of Symbols

before they can be discerned. Hence the uses of the fairy diamond, and the association of this diamond with that personage of the play whom we know as Light. It is almost always by her direction that the power of the diamond is invoked—the power of that priceless jewel which is the symbol of the light of which Tennyson speaks, “the light that never was on sea or land,” of the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world—provided it be his will to be illumined—the inner light.

Another example of Maeterlinck's ingenious and consistent choice of symbols is seen in the introduction of the Cat, which I have described in my essay as the symbol of the active spirit of evil, a spirit whose powers are greatest in the dark. Observe with what persistency the Cat opposes the children and tries to divert them from their search and lead them into mischief.

The Fairy has spoken of the wondrous power of the diamond, which, when it is used, opens the eyes, so that things may

On Maeterlinck :

be seen in all their aspects, present, past, and future—a diamond which reveals even the inside of things. With the aid of this diamond, rightly used, the Blue Bird, truth, may best be sought. The Cat regards it as his special business to interpose obstacles at every point. Who can wonder that he should do so? To the forces of evil there is no greater menace than the growth of knowledge of truth. Man sins only because he does not know—because of his ignorance. If we could see all the consequences of our actions in relation to ourselves and in relation to others, good would be so alluring and evil would be so repellent that we could not but choose the good. In words of plainest meaning it is declared that if Man gets the Blue Bird he will not only “see all, but know all.” Then the Dominion of Darkness will be ended. It is into the mouth of the Cat that the author puts this expression of evil fear.

In connection with this expression need I point out that to “see all” and to “know all” is a condition which has to

The Study of Symbols

do with truth-seeking first, however much happiness may be an ultimate consequence? If there were not countless other indications, the nature of the play as an allegory of Man's search for the higher truth would be evident from the group of symbols to which I have just referred and the expressions which, like the one just quoted, are more immediately associated with them.

Chapter VII

The Bird in Folk Lore and Story—Legends of the Basque Race—Stories of the Arabian Nights and of the Comtesse d'Aulnoy—"The little green bird who tells everything."

THE publication of my essay, *Maeterlinck's Symbolism*, has led to a number of questions being addressed to me, to the chief of which it may be useful to refer.

One inquirer, whilst agreeing with me that Maeterlinck in *The Blue Bird* uses the bird primarily as a symbol of truth, asks me what evidence I have for stating that this particular symbolism of the bird has existed for ages?

I have partly supplied the answer to this question already in referring to the symbolism of the dove in connection with the Third Person of the Trinity. I have no hesitation, however, in giving an answer of a more detailed kind. Before

The Study of Symbols

I do so there are one or two observations which I desire to make.

Whilst in an inquiry into the nature and origin of symbols I do not deprecate any demand which may be made for historical evidence, I think that there is sometimes a tendency to exaggerate the importance of possessing it, and to overlook the fact that there are some things in regard to which the evidence of common sense and simple daily observation are sufficient, even if historical evidence be wanting.

When, for example, we see a little girl playing with a doll we do not need historical evidence as to the period and circumstances under which dolls first came to be used as playthings to enable us to conclude that, whilst the girl's love for dolls may be due partly to the operation of the imitative faculties, the maternal instinct is in a measure expressed, and thus in reality symbolised, in the child's choice of her playthings. We bear in mind in this connection that boys do not usually show a like predilection.

On Maeterlinck :

Just as in the case of the child's toy we may come to a reliable conclusion as to its significance in the child's life and character apart from historical evidence, so we may come to a conclusion as to the symbolical significance of the bird. .

But, perhaps, the illustration which I have given will be thought rather trivial. If so, let me take another. Let me take the illustration of the British lion. No doubt the history of the adoption of the lion as the national emblem of England is fairly well known. But do we need to look up that history in order to be convinced that the persistent use of this symbol and its great popularity with the British people are due to the fact that the symbol expresses certain features of the British character—British love of power, British aggressiveness, and British pugnacity? Do we ever for a moment suppose that the lion represents the gentler and more domestic virtues of our people?

We may take yet another illustration. We go to the British Museum sometimes—those of us who are not born Londoners,

The Study of Symbols

and, therefore, contemptuous or indifferent to the wealth of art and the records of antiquity that are in our midst. There we see amongst the other treasures, immense pieces of sculpture which once were ornaments at the entrances to palaces and temples of ancient Assyria. Most of these pieces of sculpture represent lions with wings or bulls with wings. Do we need historical evidence as to the rise and progress of sculpture in Assyria, or as to the date of the introduction of particular emblems, before we feel ourselves justified in coming to some definite conclusions as to the spiritual, mental, and moral characteristics of the Assyrians as expressed in these works? We know from history that the Assyrians were a militant people who were under tyrannous government. But if we did not know it, these lions and bulls would suffice to tell us as much. They proclaim the spirit of aggressive strength and power, and—in the wings—swift and far-reaching strength and power.

It may be observed, by the way, that we in England have not got the four-footed

On Maeterlinck :

bull as one of our national emblems. But we have a sort of equivalent. We have a two-footed animal—a big, full-chested, broad-backed, over-fed, and pugnacious biped, to whom we give the Christian name of John. It is curious to reflect that here, at any rate, the civilisation of Britain which claims to be enlightened and democratic has artistic and spiritual affinity with the archaic and tyrannous civilisation of ancient Assyria. We, too, have our bull just as we have our lion, our Bull with a capital B. And, if we examine into the matter fully, we shall see that both emblems have to us a significance similar to that which the bull and the lion must have had to the Assyrians.

These illustrations should suffice to show that we may by the exercise of common sense come to definite and reliable conclusions on many of these matters of interpretation without feeling ourselves helplessly dependent on historical evidence. In such cases historical evidence is no doubt of value to add

The Study of Symbols

strength to our conclusions, but it is not essential to enable us to arrive at them.

As regards the bird, since the bird comes within the category of natural symbols to which I have referred, there is the less reason to have doubt as to the early recognition of the bird as such a symbol, or as to the particular significance that may most fitly be attached to it. If we must have further historical evidence, however, than that which the statements relating to the dove made in my first chapter suggest, we need only to examine the literature of the past to find many examples of a symbolic use of the bird which is quite in accord with the meaning which I have attached to it. Let us look at a few of these examples.

On the production of Maeterlinck's play at the Haymarket Theatre it was stated that in the Province of Lorraine there is a legend in which the Blue Bird is described as an inhabitant of the fabulous blue country of our dreams, and as the symbol of happiness. I quite accept that interesting statement; I have not

On Maeterlinck :

the least doubt that in the folk-lore of Lorraine there is this symbol.

Lorraine is not the only part of France, however, in which the bird is prominent in folk-lore. The Basque race, who, be it remembered, are to be found on the French side of the Pyrenees as well as on the Spanish side, have some old legends, in one of which a little bird is introduced which is endowed with the special quality of telling the truth. Certain women, for ends of their own, had deceived a king by telling him that his first child was a cat, his second a dog, and his third a bear. But the little bird tells him the truth, with, of course, very important consequences to the wicked people who had misled the monarch.

That diligent and reliable compiler of literary facts and of folk-lore, Dr. Brewer, states that this little truth-telling bird appears in sundry tales of great antiquity. In the Arabian Nights there is a tale, *The Two Sisters*, in which a bird is introduced. From its bearing on the work of Maeterlinck, it is very interesting to learn that

The Study of Symbols

this Arabian Nights story was the basis of a tale by a French authoress who wrote in the earlier part of the seventeenth century, the Comtesse D'Aulnoy. This tale is called *Princess Chery*, and it relates the circumstances of a search, not for a blue bird, but for a green bird. The green bird of this story had the marvellous gift of being able to reveal every secret, and to impart information of events past, present, or to come. Prince Chery goes in search of this bird; so do his two cousins, Brightsun and Felix. They fail to obtain it, and as a result meet with much suffering, and are imprisoned. Last of all, Fairstar, who, judging from the name which she bears, may be a symbol of good fortune, is successful, and is able, at one and the same time, not only to secure the bird, but to liberate the three princes.

The Comtesse D'Aulnoy wrote another tale called *Princess Fairstar*, in which "the little green bird who tells everything" is again introduced.

In Maeterlinck's play one of the char-

On Maeterlinck :

acters—the Cat—expresses the fear that if Man finds the Blue Bird “he will know all, he will see all,” and hence that evil forces will have lost their power over him. This is only one of a number of points of similarity which are traceable between the play and the old legends and stories. It has been suggested that Maeterlinck may have got the idea of writing *The Blue Bird* from Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. I think that after what I have just stated it will be seen that he may have found that idea much nearer home, and, at the same time, by no means exclusively in the legends of Lorraine.

“A bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.” So wrote the Biblical writer ages ago in Ecclesiastes. He saw how peculiarly the bird was fitted to be the bearer of truth. It may be doubted whether there ever has been a time when men have not seen this. What then more natural than that the bird should become a symbol of truth !

I have indicated that the peculiar fitness

The Study of Symbols

of the bird to be a symbol of truth accounts in some measure for its early adoption as one of the symbols of the Godhead, the truth in the Third Person of the Trinity being represented by a bird and goodness in the Third Person of the Trinity by the kind of bird chosen as the symbol—the dove. But, of course, this is not the only form in which the bird is used in Christian symbolism. In my essay *Maeterlinck's Symbolism* I point out that just as the power of the Gospel in St. Mark was represented by the early Christians by a lion, which in time became the great emblem of the power of Venice, as at this day it is of the power of England, so the truth of the Gospel in St. John was represented by an eagle, which is now the chief ornament of the lectern from which the Word of Truth is read in so many Christian churches.

Chapter VIII

Trees as Symbols of Churches—Animals as Secular Powers—An Obscure Scene in *The Blue Bird*.

ANOTHER question which I have had put to me is, not less than the one with which I have just dealt, interesting and pertinent to the consideration of this play regarded as an allegory of Man's search for the higher truth. It relates to the interpretation which I have given of the Forest scene, and more especially to my statement that in this scene the Trees must be taken to symbolise Churches and the Animals Secular Powers.

Amongst those to whom this branch of study is new, perhaps no part of my essay has excited more surprise and incredulity than this has done. I should have thought that it was only necessary to point to the place and nature of the scene in the scheme of the play, and to the words that are put into the mouths of

The Study of Symbols

the various characters and to the incidents represented, to have justified the interpretation which I offered. There are other considerations to guide us, however.

As regards the Trees I admit that apart from the indications, in my opinion good and sufficient, which the text gives us the task of the expositor is not so simple as it is in respect to the Animals. But this is one of those cases in which one is assisted by a reference to that Science of Correspondences of which I have spoken. When we find Swedenborg alluding to trees as symbolising knowledge of truth in the Church and to groves of trees as emblematical of various qualities of worship, whatever attitude we may take up, sympathetic or unsympathetic, towards these methods of symbolic representation, we must, at any rate, recognise that we have a possible and even probable clue to Maeterlinck's meaning. But putting these things aside, leaving Swedenborg and his probable influence on Maeterlinck's thought out of account on this point, I would ask, is it possible to think of the

On Maeterlinck :

Oak and the Mistletoe as we see them in this scene without recalling to mind the old Druidical religion? And can we entirely forget in connection with this scene the historical association of various forms of pagan worship with groves, not to speak of the explanation which some authorities give for the origin of the intricacies of Gothic architecture? Such authorities have gone so far as to say that the Gothic cathedral with its stately columns and elaborate traceries reproduces trunks, branches, and leaves of the trees amidst which our ancestors worshipped. This theory may be the outcome of pure imagination. But belief in the theory exists: both the historical and theoretical association of trees with worship must be taken into account. A consideration of these facts must go far to explain why Maeterlinck should have come to use trees as symbols of Churches.

When I am asked why I suppose that Animals are used by Maeterlinck in this scene as symbols of Secular Powers, I may reply by putting a question on my

The Study of Symbols

own account. Why is it that for countless generations Secular Powers have themselves chosen to be represented by symbols of this kind? To those who are sceptical as to the basis of this feature of my interpretation I commend a study of the national and civic emblems—in which we have that glorious beast to which reference has been made already, the British lion, and in which we have also the bear of Russia, the eagle of Prussia, the cock of France, and countless others. Let these sceptics take a walk to the place where once stood Temple Bar, and gaze on that fearful and wonderful creature, the Griffin, which is the symbol of a Secular Power which, in the opinion of foreigners, is second only to the Imperial Government—“*me lor maire*,” and the Corporation of the City of London.

And if we need other examples of the use of animals as symbols of Secular Powers we can find them in abundance. Some of our great families are territorial magnates; not a few are descendants of men who in early times wielded vast

On Maeterlinck :

authority. Turn over the pages of Debrett in which the coats-of-arms which these families have inherited are depicted. Fix in mind all the heraldic beasts which you will find there. Next imagine, if you can, all these beasts suddenly endowed with life. What then would you gaze upon? Something very like what the Zoological Gardens would be—if you saw them in a nightmare.

Whilst now many of these heraldic devices can only be described as of the category of arbitrary or accidental symbols, originally most of them were natural symbols chosen to express some recognised attribute or quality of those persons by whom they were adopted, just as in most cases surnames were similarly chosen.

Far from there being anything strange in supposing that by the animals Maeterlinck intends to symbolise Secular Powers, it is the first conclusion which most people who carefully consider the subject will come to, when once they perceive that it is an allegory of Man's search for truth which is being set before them.

The Study of Symbols

The symbols of the Trees and the Animals are of the kind which I have described as composite—partly natural, and Correspondential, and partly arbitrary or accidental. But, admittedly, in the case of the Animals the natural element in the origin and character of the symbols is much more easily traceable than in the case of the Trees.

Chapter IX

The Illustration of the Jig-saw Puzzle—A Clue followed up—The Normal Experience of Man in Search for the Higher Truth.

THERE is a puzzle which some of my readers may have amused themselves with, known as the jig-saw puzzle. On sheets of wood or cardboard which form a complete square there is a picture, but this has been cut up into a large number of irregularly shaped pieces. The puzzle is to put the pieces together again, and discover what the picture represents. You examine the various pieces, and you find one which has on it, we will say, what is unmistakably part of the trunk of an elephant. At once you conclude that, at any rate, an elephant is in the picture. Following this clue, you pick out other parts of the trunk. Gradually you get the head, and then the rest of the body, and at last you find that you have a com-

The Study of Symbols

plete representation of an elephant, and that this with a few accessories forms the entire picture. What, then, do you conclude? Of course, you have not the smallest doubt that the intention of the artist was to represent an elephant. There may be other things in the picture besides an elephant, but that the main purpose of the artist was to represent an elephant you entertain no sort of doubt. If anyone tells you that the artist may all the while have meant to represent an alligator or a Skye terrier—well, you may be polite enough not to contradict him, but you form your own estimate of his intelligence.

It is much the same with the interpretation of a symbolic work of a somewhat elaborate character like *The Blue Bird* as it is with this jig-saw puzzle. The bird itself and the colour of the bird are as the trunk of the elephant. "The grass that sings" may be compared with the tusks. Once a clear sight of these features is obtained it becomes comparatively easy to construct the rest of

On Maeterlinck :

the picture, and, as is the case always with studies of this kind, the more features you are able to detect and place the more simple does the remainder of the task become.

To one versed in symbolism a right perception of the meaning of the bird of this play, and therefore of the real meaning of the allegory, may be inferred even from the colour ascribed to the bird. For, as I have pointed out in my earlier chapters, whilst birds, considered generically, may have more than one symbolic meaning ascribed to them, a bird of a blue colour is a natural—and Correspondential—symbol of the higher truth, the testimony of its use in the folk-lore of Lorraine as a symbol of happiness, notwithstanding.

When we arrive at this theory of the meaning of the bird the interpretation of “the grass that sings” is next of value in confirming the conclusion come to. The diamond as the symbol of spiritual light, and that helpful guide to the children, whom we know in the play as Light—

The Study of Symbols

symbol of reason, intelligence, and knowledge—then also most naturally take their places in the sequence of ideas which the author is presenting.

The clue, once it is found, is not difficult to follow. When the reader studies *The Blue Bird*, and perceives what is signified by the bird itself and the other symbols which I have indicated, let him ask himself what is the normal experience of Man in the search for the higher truth—I mean the experience of Man as seen in the lives of the greatest teachers. First he seeks to know what the past has to say—the appeal to tradition—the visit to the late grandparents in “The Land of Memory.” Having gained what knowledge he can by this means, he next looks around him, and asks what is the meaning of things as they exist in the present. He asks what part war, disease, falsity, and every form of evil have in the great world-scheme. He insists that all those spirits who represent these things shall come out of their caves. He examines them, and

On Maeterlinck :

passes a free judgment upon them—the visit to “The Palace of Night.” Next, he turns to those things around him which have the aspect of good. Amidst many forms of religious belief he seeks to find the true one. Disappointment may result, often does result. He may even come acutely in conflict with those authorities to whom he has looked for guidance : Principalities and Powers may seem to be arrayed against him—the journey in “The Forest.”

Yet he is not dismayed. With faith undimmed and courage undaunted he presses forward. He analyses every experience of his life. If the love of pleasure for a time allures him, and threatens to divert his thoughts from higher things, he seeks to know wherein pleasure truly consists : in “The Palace of Happiness” the distinction between luxury which is selfish and debasing and the joy which is pure and inspiring is brought home to him. He still goes on his journey. As his thoughts broaden and deepen and as his practical experi-

The Study of Symbols

ence enlarges, the belief that good still triumphs over ill grows strong within him. He finds that strength comes out of weakness, power out of failure. With Tennyson he comes to see how true it is that on stepping-stones of our dead selves we may rise to higher things; like Browning, he acquires a vivid consciousness that God *is* in His heaven, that all *is* right with the world. Not only does he let the dead past bury its dead, he makes it possible, nay, he ensures that the experiences of the past, however ugly and forbidding some of them may be to contemplate, now that he looks back upon them, shall all be converted into things of beauty—the resurrection scene of “The Graveyard.” And now do all things seem to him possible. Advance—spiritual, moral, and intellectual—opens to him in endless prospect—“The Kingdom of the Future” is becoming the Kingdom of the Present.

Surely once we understand that an allegory of Man’s search for truth is before us these are the things which we

On Maeterlinck

must expect to find in it. And *The Blue Bird* contains them all. When we survey those features of the work as a whole we see that what at first looked like a puzzle which baffled solution is a puzzle no longer, but a simple and beautiful picture.

Chapter X

Test of a Work of Art—Surface Meanings and Inner Meanings—Parable of the Prodigal Son—Conditions of Artistic Production.

A LADY who has taken up a rather critical attitude towards *The Blue Bird*, and even towards symbolic plays in general, has put to me a crucial question. She asks : “ Can a work which requires so much explaining truly be said to be a work of art ? ” The answer is, it seems to me, obvious. A work from which no pleasure or profit could be derived unless and until it had been subject to elaborate analysis and explanation would not be a work of art at all. It might be a good treatise on philosophy, or have special value as a contribution to the study of religion or ethics, but a work of art it could not be.

One test of a work of art is that it shall yield pleasure even at the first sight,

On Maeterlinck :

and have on the surface a plain and intelligible significance. This is, in my view, indisputable. But it does not follow that under the surface beauty of the work there may not be a deeper, and, it may be, greater beauty, or that under the surface meaning there may not be hidden another meaning, or even a number of meanings, all of them possibly of greater value than the one which is the most obvious. If the work is a great work these things probably will follow, though, of course, the meanings must be correlated ; they must not contradict one another.

The Blue Bird stands a test of this description. There have been few plays so little understood in their deeper meaning, and, nevertheless, so much liked for their obvious surface meaning, as this play has been.

But here a word of explanation is necessary. I have used the illustration of the jig-saw puzzle with the picture of the elephant. The illustration is good so far as it goes. In the main it enables me to make more clear how a definite

The Study of Symbols

interpretation of a symbolic work may be arrived at, and to indicate why one should have confidence in the result come to. It is not an entirely satisfactory illustration, however. For whilst with the jig-saw puzzle we can get only one picture, in a symbolic work of art we may, as I have pointed out, have more than one meaning. To make the illustration of the jig-saw puzzle quite complete for my purpose we must suppose that the picture which is made is not merely a literal representation of an elephant, but is itself a symbolic picture. *Then* there may conceivably be in it the meaning within meaning which I allude to.

This, however, is by the way. Asking the reader to pardon the introduction of an explanation which I have thought necessary in justification of my logical consistency, I wish even at the cost of repetition to insist that in the study of a symbolic work we must not suppose that the adoption of one interpretation necessarily excludes or invalidates another. As I have said already, there may be more

On Maeterlinck :

than one meaning : there may be meaning within meaning.

No doubt *The Blue Bird*, to which a variety of meanings has been attached, some of them superficial and merely popular and some more hidden and recondite, is a case in point. But those to whom this branch of literary study is new may be more convinced if I give another example. I will take a story with which all are familiar—the parable of the Prodigal Son.

On the surface the parable of the Prodigal Son is a powerful story of youthful folly and fatherly love. Behind that is the illustration of human wickedness, the wickedness of the whole human race, and of Divine love towards the human race. And behind both of those meanings there are others which are of the nature of extensions of those meanings. The parable has for this reason engaged the profoundest thought of religious and theological teachers, some of whom see in it doctrines illustrative of Man's freedom of will, illustrative of the non-

The Study of Symbols

eternity of hell, and even of universal restoration. There may be differences of opinion as to the value of these meanings or the merits of these questions. Of course there must be. It is not competent, however, for any of us to say that these doctrines are not there, or that the author of the parable did not intend to teach them. We have no means of interrogating the author in the matter. If the framework of the parable sustains a certain interpretation, and if this interpretation is in accord with all that we know of the teacher's character and of the rest of his utterances, it must be accepted as, at any rate, a legitimate thing to put it forward, even though individuals here or there may feel it incumbent upon themselves to dissent from one or other of the interpretations, either on the ground that it goes too far or that it does not go far enough, as the case may be.

My point, of course, is that the supreme quality of the parable considered as a work of art—the only feature with

On Maeterlinck :

which I am now actually concerned—is that it admits of so much meaning being put into it, or of such variety of meanings, all of them, when fully understood, consistent with one another. And this is a quality which pertains to all great works of art which are of symbolic value.

Before I pass from this branch of our subject there is another feature to which I wish to call attention. It is closely related to what I have just been saying about the parable of the Prodigal Son. Besides the meaning or varieties of meaning which a great symbolic artist may put into his work of set purpose, and of which he may be fully conscious, a work may be charged with meaning beyond that which it was in the author's scheme to express. This feature may well be found wherever by virtue of exceptional mental and moral gifts an author stands more or less in orderly relation to the facts of the universe, to the spiritual and material worlds, which the science of symbolism, and, in my

The Study of Symbols

opinion, still more the Science of Correspondences, aid so much to explain.

From its bearing upon this point I may quote a passage from an article by Mr. W. G. Rawlinson, one of three articles introductory to a work entitled *The Water Colour Drawings of J. M. W. Turner, R.A.*, which was the spring number of *The Studio* for 1909. Referring to Turner, Mr. Rawlinson says:

Then he often had a deep meaning in his pictures, beyond what was to be seen on the surface, beyond, perhaps, what he could himself have always explained. Sometimes, no doubt, it was far-fetched, sometimes fantastic, yet it gives a character to his art which mere technical skill or perfect design do not by themselves attain. By the modern school of landscapists this statement will probably be regarded as a defect or even a heresy. Pictorial art, they say, should not be "literary," should not be intellectual. But to me it seems that the work of the highest artists—of Leonardo, Michael Angelo, Holbein, Rembrandt, for example—always invariably appeals to the intellect as well as to the senses. Mind, sensibly or insensibly, intentionally or unintentionally, speaks to mind. As has been well said apropos of Ruskin's writings on Turner: "What if Ruskin's torch lights up some beauty that the painter himself was never aware of? As a great man's inventions will carry more readings

On Maeterlinck :

than his own, so the meaning of a great painter is not to be limited to his expressed or palpable intentions. There is a harmony between the imaginings of both and nature, which opens out an infinite range of significance and supports an infinite variety of interpretations."

In these words Mr. Rawlinson states the truth of the matter with singular felicity. I commend the passage to the close attention of those who in the reading of interpretations of creative works of art are predisposed to be sceptical as to the presence in such works of meanings which the author or artist has not made it his business specially to import or to proclaim.

It must indeed be evident that an artist—whether in letters, in paint, in stone, or any other medium—who devotes his life to a particular class of work, who cultivates his spiritual nature in a particular direction, and whose perceptions and intuitions are of the best and the truest which in the present imperfect state of humanity are possible, must impart many qualities to his work over and

The Study of Symbols

above those which come within the scope of his deliberate and conscious design.

How far it may be said of the work of Maeterlinck that it is invested with qualities only to be explained in accordance with the theory which Mr. Rawlinson so well states, I do not attempt to determine. It is enough for me to know that I find a certain meaning in his work. For proof of its presence I am content to appeal to the internal evidence of the work itself—always, of course, with a due regard to the fact that a work of art which is worthy to be so described must in the nature of things be in perfect unity, must always be homogeneous, and that any meaning which may be ascribed to any one of the details of the work must necessarily be in harmony with the work as a whole.

Given evidence such as I have indicated, I seek no other—not even the evidence which some commentators on *The Blue Bird* seem to think necessary, the evidence which personal explanations on the part of the author might afford.

On Maeterlinck

Those who ask for evidence of that kind must indeed have strange notions of the conditions of artistic production. The author of a creative work who has confidence that he has done his task properly must ever leave that work to speak for itself. To seek other evidence of the author's meaning than the work affords implies doubt as to the author's capacity to express his ideas, or a want of faith in our capacity to understand him. Not only so, whatever gossiping interest extraneous statements by an author may have, his creative work *must* in the long run be left to speak for itself. For as Mr. Rawlinson so well indicates, it is not always possible for a creative artist to analyse and explain the conditions under which certain results are attained, nor for him intellectually to account for each and all of the characteristics of that which he produces.

These considerations bring me to yet a further phase of this inquiry, viz. that of the spirit in which a work of symbolic art should be approached. This I will deal with in my next chapter.

Chapter XI

The Appeal to the Emotions—Indifference to an Author's Meaning—The Manner Secondary; the Message Primary.

A YOUNG and cultured student of the drama told me recently that he had just read Maeterlinck's play, *The Sightless*. "What do you think of it?" I inquired. "It is really a fine piece of work," he replied. "In what respect is it fine?" I asked. "Oh, in the appeal to the emotions. Not for a long time have I read anything that I liked better." "I am very glad to hear you say so," I answered. "I quite share your liking. Would you mind telling me what, in your opinion, the play means?" At this inquiry my friend seemed to be somewhat taken aback. He admitted that he had not thought much on this point: certainly he had come to no definite conclusion regarding it. The appeal to his emotions

On Maeterlinck :

had interested and pleased him. And that, he seemed to think, was sufficient.

My observation of readers and students generally of art in a somewhat wide circle convinces me that the case of my friend is quite typical. There is a large number of intelligent people who are quite content to have their emotions appealed to without concerning themselves to reflect as to the purpose of the author or artist in making the appeal, or as to the intellectual ideas which lie behind it. Their attitude towards the writer, painter, or sculptor, or whatever he may be, might be expressed in terms like these : "The language, form, colour, and composition of your work are a delight to us : the beauty of the thing quite thrills us. But what you mean by it all we do not know, and are not greatly concerned to know. Perhaps your work has not got a meaning, or if it has it may not be a meaning worth thinking about. A foolish person told us the other day that it had not only a meaning but several meanings—that it had in it meaning within meaning, like

The Study of Symbols

some of the nests of boxes that the Japanese make. Of course, that person was *very* foolish."

It is hardly necessary to say that such a speech would not be felt to be flattering by the writer or artist to whom it was addressed. And I can well imagine that when a writer or an artist, for reasons which seemed to him quite good and sufficient, has expressed himself in symbolic form, the effect of remarks which, however expressed, resemble those quoted above must be to drive him into the solitude of his own study with a very much diminished estimate of the discernment and sympathy of his fellows.

A person who reads a symbolic work, who admires it, and yet confesses that he does not know what it means may have much to excuse him. The meaning may be too deeply hidden for him; he may not have the key. Yet until he knows what the meaning is he can neither judge the work nor rightly profit from it. He is not in a much better position than one who looks at a tablet on which hierogly-

On Maeterlinck :

phics are inscribed, and admires the design and execution of the men, animals, and other figures of which the hieroglyphics are composed, but is unable to read the hieroglyphics themselves, which to their original authors derived their real value, not from the skill with which they were carved, but from the circumstance that they expressed certain ideas or recorded certain facts.

I admit that this illustration is not perfect. Few illustrations are perfect. A symbolic play or picture or statue, if it has worth at all, must be charged with many artistic qualities which a tablet inscribed with hieroglyphics cannot well possess. If from this point of view I try to make my argument still more clear, I may use another illustration. I may compare the student of a symbolic work, who is unable to perceive, or does not concern himself with the meaning of the work, with a play-goer who witnesses the performance of a play in a foreign tongue which he does not understand. The eye of such a play-goer is appealed to by the

The Study of Symbols

pantomime of the actors, by the colours of the dresses, and by the scenes. His ear is appealed to by the voices of the performers, by the very music of which alternations of feeling may be expressed. By all these agencies combined his emotions are partially stirred. The fact remains, however, that not knowing the language in which the play is being acted, he cannot completely appreciate the work at all. Even the appeal to his emotions cannot be otherwise than partial. For it is on the ideas which the words of the play express that the author must in the very nature of the case depend chiefly in his effort to reach the emotions of the audience.

Here, again—bearing in mind that we are discussing the question of the right appreciation not of a mere play of action or of character, but of a work which is essentially symbolic—I use an illustration which necessarily is imperfect. For the words of a play and the symbols of a play, if the play be of a symbolic kind, are not necessarily one and the same

On Maeterlinck :

thing. The distinction is, however, a question of degree. The symbols may be openly conveyed in the words or they may be hidden behind or within the words. It is in the symbols that the speech of the symbolist truly consists : and unless we perceive the symbols and understand them we cannot apprehend the meaning of the work as a whole. Not even in respect to the appeal to the emotions can we be *en rapport* with the author or artist, though it may well be that owing to a mental and spiritual relationship between him and ourselves we may have a partial or sub-conscious apprehension of his meaning, and that, in a way which we may not at the time be able to explain to ourselves, our emotions may be stirred.

The manner of the message of a teacher or artist is secondary. That which he has to say must always be of vastly more importance than his manner of saying it. And though it may well be that the manner in which a message is delivered may charm us, and even stir our

The Study of Symbols

emotions deeply, if the power of the artist is only, or even chiefly, in his manner, and if the message is really of no account, the artist is not a great artist. On the other hand, if he truly has something to say to us which is worth saying, but we all the while think of the manner alone, we do dishonour and, it may be, injustice to the artist. We never know the artist truly until we have divined what his message is.

It is questionable whether we should ever be satisfied to have our emotions appealed to without consideration of the means by which the appeal is made. There are those who come before us as artists and teachers who are but charlatans. Sometimes the executive skill which they display is the greater in proportion to their charlatanry. Generally, it is skill of an imitative kind: rarely or never will you find a humbug who is a great creative artist. But the charlatan may have the power to deceive by the superficial beauty of his work or the finesse of his execution. It is well, there-

On Maeterlinck :

fore, to clearly determine, if we can, whether the artist has a message, and, if so, what it is.

There is yet a further point to be noted. Why should any virile reader or observer be content with a merely partial apprehension of a literary or other work of art when by sufficient study of that work his apprehension may become complete? Why should he be content with a nebulous, weak, and in all probability evanescent impression of such work when by giving thought to the task it may be in his power to pluck out the heart of the mystery to which his attention is given? It may be that with some works the mystery when solved will be found to be but poor and valueless in itself. But, if so, it still is well. The student will be in a better position thereafter to estimate and "place" the author or artist who has offered it to him for his admiration. But, on the other hand, the discovery may prove to be rich and valuable. Then the reader's store of intellectual and spiritual wealth is increased. And he will know

The Study of Symbols

better how to appraise and make full use of the new, and, it may be, yet nobler works which are presented for his acceptance.

Chapter XII

The Purpose of Symbolic Writing—Misconceptions of Critics—The Charge of "Symbol Hunting"—Monsters of the Palace of Night—Conclusion.

AS may be inferred from what I have said already, since my interpretation of *The Blue Bird* has been placed before the public it has been much criticised. So far as the criticisms bear upon the present subject of our inquiry it may be useful for me further to refer to them.

A few critics appear to have written under the impression that Maeterlinck adopts the symbolic form of writing not for what must surely be the natural aim of a writer—the clear and full, as well as the artistic, expression of his thought—but rather for purposes of concealment. They seem to assume that symbols are adopted by Maeterlinck not to illustrate but to hide his thought, not the better to

The Study of Symbols

impress his meaning upon us when we come to see it, but rather to hinder us from seeing it at all. And apparently holding this view, these writers seem to regard me as a sort of wicked anatomist, who in his passion for finding out things—"symbol-hunting," one of them called it—subjects the unfortunate victim to so much vivisection that at the end of the process hardly any life remains in it and most of its beauty is destroyed.

This was the line of criticism which was adopted by a writer in *The Academy* and also by a writer in the *Manchester Guardian*. The writer in *The Academy* said: "To pick the work to pieces and ticket each bit in this didactic fashion is simply to destroy its beauty, not to enhance it; the dainty, delicate savour of Maeterlinck's magical art is spoiled, just as a rough, heavy hand may ruin a butterfly's wing or tear down a shining, dewy cobweb on a summer morning." The writer in the *Manchester Guardian* said: "Mr. Rose's essay is perhaps only so far unjust to Maeterlinck that it makes

On Maeterlinck :

clear what Maeterlinck intended to leave dim."

Criticism such as this appears to me to be very wide of the mark. I cannot affect to be informed as to the intentions of Maeterlinck excepting so far as they are to be inferred from his work. And certainly I have no reason to suppose that the writer in the *Manchester Guardian* has any better means of information on this subject than I have. But on the general question which both critics raise, I am at a loss to see why there should be any imputation of heedlessness or of injustice against a writer who does what, apparently, I am admitted to have done—makes clear the meaning of a symbolist. Is it suggested that when a poet or a dramatist of the calibre of Maeterlinck writes an inherently symbolic work it is not permissible for his readers to inquire what his symbols mean? And if, as has been the case with *The Blue Bird*, various inadequate interpretations have been attempted, is it really to be pronounced an inconsiderate and "unjust" thing for

The Study of Symbols

a life-long student of symbolism like myself to point out that the author is being only half understood? Is the meaning of a symbolic work to be regarded as, like the charms of an Eastern beauty, a thing ever to be veiled from the general eye? And is it to be supposed that if those charms bear the light of day they will be the less because they are seen? To use a simile which may be even more appropriate to the present case, do the appreciation of an author and the interests of literary culture require that the meaning of a great play or poem shall ever be kept in a fog?

Some time ago a so-called comic paper published an article the humour of which consisted in the effort to sum up the characters of a number of distinguished men in a single word. The author of *The Blue Bird* was dealt with thus, "M. Maeterlinck—Charlatan." Here, indeed, was a piece of injustice. But what had made such injustice possible? The only reply to that question which I can offer is that the writer of this article, like a

On Maeterlinck :

great many other people whom I have met, had puzzled himself over the symbolic works of Maeterlinck, and not being able to discover any clear, definite, and consecutive meaning in them, had concluded that no such meaning was there ; in other words, that the works were to a large extent pretentious, and were in the main examples of spurious symbolism. On the admission of the critic of the *Manchester Guardian* I have, at any rate, shown that no such charge can be brought against *The Blue Bird*. Therefore, what appears to him to be an act of injustice, appears to me to be an act of vindication.

I must leave it to the impartial reader to say whether he feels that *The Blue Bird* has less or more charm for him after he has endured my explanation of that work. I must, at the same time, remind those who may be influenced by such criticism as that which I have quoted that the question of giving a full interpretation of the meaning of a work of art like *The Blue Bird* is not, as the writers whom

The Study of Symbols

I have cited imply, a question of interference with the light and shade or the tone and feeling of the work at all. Nor is it a question of interference with the harmony of the work. Were such interference possible, it would, indeed, be an evil. But it is not possible. So far as Maeterlinck's work is well and truly done all these things can, so to speak, take care of themselves. No, this question of interpretation is purely and simply a question of the analysis of ideas, of finding out what an author means, and what it is that he has to tell us.

• If Maeterlinck himself had the desire—though, indeed, the thing is incredible—and if also he had the power to prevent inquiry as to his ideas, he would not have the right to give effect to this desire, to exercise this power. But we should dishonour him to suppose that he could possibly have such a desire. To imagine that the author of an allegory in which the courageous and free search for truth is pictured and commended would deprecate the fullest examination of his meaning

On Maeterlinck :

in that allegory, and to suppose that he would deprecate frank and clear statement as to the result of such examination is not only incongruous, it is ludicrous.

To critics who have no better opinion of Maeterlinck than to suppose that he would not rather encourage our search into his meaning, and wish us honestly and plainly to say what our conclusions are, I commend for consideration one passage in particular in *The Blue Bird*. It is that in the Palace of Night scene in which Tytyl comes to the fifth of the caves in which the evil mysteries of Night are hidden. The door having been opened it is hastily closed again. Night asks Tytyl what he has seen. Tytyl, who is described in the text as being upset by his view into this cave, and as pale and trembling all over, replies, "I don't know; it was awful. They were all seated like monsters without eyes." And then he asks, "Who was that giant who tried to seize me?" Night answers, "It probably was Silence. He has charge of this door."

The Study of Symbols

There are conditions in which silence is good, wise, and beautiful—in no sense monstrous. But there are other conditions in which silence implies the avoidance of a teacher's office, deliberate consent to ignorance and to error, tacit co-operation in the propaganda of error, indifference to the countless evils which error and its sister falsehood bring in their train. The giant who typifies these conditions is rightly put in this cave of Night where are "monsters without eyes." But we are not to infer that he on his part is without sight. From the fact that he is in charge of the door we must rather infer that he has eyes. Presumably it is just because he has eyes, but is silent in respect to all that he sees, and might, for all the good he does, as well be without them, that he is represented as a more gigantic monster than all the rest.

I have had no wish to claim this monster as a near acquaintance. And certain I am that from those by whom truth is valued, and plain speech encouraged he will find no countenance.

The Homeric poems are not conceived didactically, but are didactic in their essence, as all good art is. There is an increasing insensibility to this character, and even an open denial of it, among us, now, which is one of the most curious errors of modernism—the peculiar and judicial blindness of an age which, having long practised art and poetry for the sake of pleasure only, has become incapable of reading their language when they are didactic.—Ruskin, in *The Queen of the Air*.

On "The Sightless" : Maeterlinck's Picture of a Religious Crisis

I

THE SIGHTLESS is one of the earliest, one of the shortest, and one of the best of the plays of M. Maeterlinck. It was published in 1890 under the title *Les Aveugles*. In the same year Maeterlinck published *La Princesse Maleine*, a prose drama in five acts. His only previous production at that time was a small book of verse entitled *Serres Chaudes*. This was in 1889. Maeterlinck was then twenty-nine, having been born in Ghent in 1862.

The English translation of *Les Aveugles* was made by Miss Lawrence Alma-Tadema, who also translated *Pelléus et Mélisande*.

On Maeterlinck :

These two plays were published in a single volume by the Walter Scott Publishing Company. A better translation of *Les Aveugles* one could not hope for. It reproduces in choice English the mystic charm of the original.

The play is in one act. It is a drama of the soul. Of action there is very little. A company of blind people anxious as to their whereabouts keep up the dialogue, never moving away from the place where we see them at the beginning of the piece. Yet so skilfully are the ideas worked out, so apt is every sentence and every word, so finely is the psychology of the various characters indicated that we follow the development of the play with growing interest, and feel when the curtain drops that we have indeed had before us a work having in it some of the distinctive elements of Greek tragedy—unity of time and place, unity of interest and idea, and, above all, nobility of theme and dignity of expression. Although, as I have said, the persons do not move from place to place, although in the external and material

“The Sightless”

sense almost nothing happens, there is a progression of thought, an accumulation of effect, and a climax of interest which to those who are imaginative enough to feel in sympathy with the aim of the author are profoundly impressive.

I have said “when the curtain drops.” But, of course, in the present case, this is a figurative phrase. *The Sightless* is not a play for the stage at all, at least not for the stage of to-day. Having regard to present conditions of theatrical production and public taste I cannot imagine the manager who would put this piece on the boards, the performers who would have sufficient confidence in their powers to appear in it, or the audience that would sit it through with understanding and sympathy. As a play for the stage it is worse, or should I say better, than those more elaborate productions of Mr. Bernard Shaw and Mr. Granville Barker which, like *Getting Married* and *The Madras House*, are composed of conversation without action, and have on that account proved rather trying to the play-goer.

On Maeterlinck :

In providing a play without action or with a minimum of action, a play dependent on psychology almost entirely, Maeterlinck anticipated the dramatists whom I have named by many years. It is evidence of his superiority as an artist that he saw that a play of this kind should not be spun out beyond the conventional limits of a single act. In days to come when the spirituality of play-goers is sufficiently high, and purely symbolic work is not as an unknown tongue, *The Sightless* may even be acted, and prove a stage success. But it must remain for a long time a play for the study, appealing to a few sympathetic spirits, though to them with a power that only a work of real genius can exert.

II

As I have indicated, we have before us a company of blind people anxious as to their whereabouts. They include men and

“The Sightless”

women. All but one are old. Amongst them is a woman who is mad. She is nursing a child.

The scene is laid on an island, and in what is described as “a very ancient northern forest, eternal of aspect.” The time is midnight, and the sky is “profoundly starred.” From the conversation of the blind people we gather that they have come from an asylum. They have had a priest as their guide, but they imagine that he has left them, and they are on that account the more distressed. They would be thankful were they back in the asylum again. Whither they were being led they cannot tell. They know that there is a river near. One of the men is deaf as well as blind. Continually in the ears of the rest of the company there is a sound as of the waters of a great sea. They are conscious that a lighthouse is not far away. They feel confident that if but the priest would return to guide them they would be safe. But, alas, unknown to them, the priest is lying dead in their very midst!

On Maeterlinck :

Such are the broad outlines of the situation in which these blind people are represented. It is a situation which is in the extreme distressing and pathetic--a situation which in well-chosen symbols reflects an experience which has been many times repeated in the history of humanity.

The sightless men and women in this play represent various types of human society. On the island, our little world, symbol of this mortal life, we find them in a time of religious crisis, a time of vast transition. The Church, the asylum in which they had long found kindly shelter and spiritual nurture, gives them shelter and nurture no more. Apparently their creed had become outworn. Even the priest, their guide, had ceased to have faith in it. But, unhappily, he has lacked both the spiritual insight and the intellectual power to reconstruct for them a new and living creed. Though they do not yet know it, his priesthood is at an end.

The night symbolises, as does their

“ The Sightless ”

own sightless condition, the depth of their spiritual darkness. Yet in the fact that the sky is “ profoundly starred ” we have the intimation of suns and systems without limit wherein there is fullness of light. The forest symbolises the entanglements of the soul arising more especially from the natural and external conditions of religious faith in which these sightless persons have existed hitherto. The sound as of the sea which they hear, often with fear and alarm, tells of the vast unknown : the illimitable ocean of truth. In the references to the lighthouse we have intimations of the existence of that inner light to which Man must look for guidance when all is dark without. “ It may be that we are in the forest that surrounds the lighthouse,” says the Sixth Blind Man. And this we must think to be indeed a strange place for a lighthouse until the meaning of the forest becomes apparent to us.

The river is the river of the waters of life, and may, at the same time, be viewed as representative of truth when brought

On Maeterlinck :

within measurable compass or serviceable limits. That some members of the company should believe that the asylum is to be found beyond the river is, at any rate, evidence that their power of intuition is in some measure preserved to them. The First Blind Man is heard to exclaim : "Let us keep seated ! Let us wait ! We don't know the direction of the big river, and there are bogs all round the asylum." Of this we may be sure, if ever the company reach an asylum they will find that it is not the one which they quitted, but an asylum different and better and more abiding.

Interesting is it to observe how well the distinctive character of each of the sightless people is sketched and the richness of detail in the symbolism of the play. Even the character of the dead priest is portrayed to us in the talk of the blind people, so that we have a vivid idea of him in his later hours. The First Blind Man, not knowing that the priest is no longer alive, says : "He is growing too old. It appears that he has hardly

“The Sightless”

been able to see for some time himself. He will not own it, from fear that another should come and take his place amongst us. . . . We ought to have another guide: he never listens to us now, and we are becoming too many for him. . . . I am sure that he has led us astray, and is trying to find the way again.” Thus we see that the priest’s growing doubt of the truth of the creed which he had continued to teach has had its correlative in distrust on the part of those whom he should have led.

But it is in the words of the Oldest Blind Woman that the real magnitude of the crisis as regards the relations of priest and people is indicated: “He was anxious too. They say that the great storms of these last days have swelled the stream, and that all the dykes are giving way. He said, too, that the sea frightened him: it appears to be agitated for no reason”—precisely the attitude of the leader who is conscious that he is not strong enough to face the conditions which, as the old is giving place to the new,

On Maeterlinck :

are being set up. Later on, the Oldest Blind Woman also remarks : " You made him suffer too much : you have killed him. . . . You would go no farther ; you wanted to sit down on the stones by the roadside to eat ; you grumbled all day. . . . I heard him sigh. . . . He lost courage."

That the priest was a man of the finest feeling and strictly honest is obvious. Though he had become uncertain of the way, he was ever ready to give his people the best guidance in his power. But he needed help not less than those whom he led, at least the help of sympathy. This had been withheld. The situation had become to him one of continuous agony.

In this connection we may observe that as the grip of the priest on the intellect of his people had loosened he had the more sought to appeal to the emotions. " Then he speaks only to the women now ? " says the First Blind Man, interrogatively, when the Oldest Blind Man has remarked of the priest, " He has gone very far. I think he said so to the

“The Sightless”

women.” “He took my hands on leaving,” says the Young Blind Woman, “and his hands trembled as if he was afraid. Then he kissed me. . . . He told me that he did not know what was going to happen. He told me that the old men’s reign was coming to an end, perhaps. . . . I did not understand him. He told me that he was going towards the great lighthouse.”

It has been characteristic of the priest’s solicitude to keep hold upon the affections of his people and to appeal at least to their emotions that, whilst he has been doing his best to lead both the men and the women, he has arranged the women in a group separate from the men. But a religion which does not rest on intellect as well as on feeling is doomed. From the exclamations of the men we see that they think that an injury has been done to them by this action of the priest.

On the individuality of each of the blind persons I have not space to dwell. The impatience, and obtuseness of the First Blind Man, the reasonableness and

On Maeterlinck :

hopefulness of the Oldest Blind Man, may be noted more especially, though, indeed, each of the company is a type of some member or other of the great human family. Most patient and hopeful of all are the women.

The details of the scene are filled in with a master hand. The stones against which the blind people stumble are types of the hard concrete facts which are a cause of offence to those who have not yet learned to seek truth rightly. The fallen trees and decayed vegetation represent the beliefs which once flourished and gave food and shelter to men, but have now ceased to have either beauty or service. The thorns and the dark or carrion birds are symbols of the pain and noisomeness of error, and types of evil and falsity. And the intense cold of which the blind people complain so bitterly suggests the sense of the deprivation of Divine love—of the absence of the heat of the Heavenly Sun—of which they are now more than ever conscious.

“The Sightless”

III

It is in working up to the climax of his play—for it has a climax—that the author shows his greatest art. In times of crisis such as Maeterlinck here brings before us, when definite and helpful guidance from their spiritual teachers is no longer given, men are thrown back on their powers of intuition and their primary instincts. The need of religion is felt, but how that need may be satisfied they cannot well discern. They grope forward as best they can, and avail themselves with avidity of such help as comes to them from their own innate perceptions of what is right and best for themselves. And without some sense of reliance on these perceptions their condition becomes increasingly desperate. This the author plainly shows to us. He has a very similar faith in the appeal to and in reliance upon the instincts of

On Maeterlinck :

humanity to that which Emerson evinced when in one of his journals he wrote :

Be my life, then, a long gratitude ; I will trust my instincts. For always a reason halts (i.e. moves haltingly) after an instinct, and when I have deviated from instinct, comes somebody with a profound theory teaching that I ought to have followed it—some Goethe, Swedenborg, or Carlyle.

A similar doctrine was expressed by Ruskin when, in *The Ethics of the Dust*, referring to the revelation of the Divine Spirit to Man, he wrote :

It seems to me, on the whole, that the feelings of the purest and most mightily passioned human souls are likely to be the truest. Not, indeed, if they do not desire to know the truth, or blind themselves to it that they may please themselves with passion, for then they are no longer pure. But if, continually seeking and accepting the truth as far as it is discernible, they trust their Maker for the integrity of the instincts which He has gifted them with, and rest in a sense of a higher truth which they cannot demonstrate, I think that they will be most in the right, so.

We need not stop to discuss whether Ruskin in this passage is considering humanity under somewhat different con-

“The Sightless”

ditions from those which are presented to us in *The Sightless*. That question is not material ; the underlying doctrine of reliance upon the instincts is the same.

That the primary and God-given instincts of Man may be saving guides when the higher faculties of reason are blinded and other means of knowledge, for the time being, are not open to him is, indeed, an important part of Maeterlinck's creed, though, of course, it is ever to be assumed that good intention on the part of the seeker is a necessary condition of successful search.

‘It is in the feminine side of his nature that Man's instincts and perceptions are preserved in greatest purity ; the feminine principle impels him to the love of truth and good before ever the masculine principle is employed in analysing and confirming those things which are believed to constitute truth and good. In this play throughout, the women are represented as gifted with finer perceptions of the whereabouts of the wanderers and of the conditions which surround

On Maeterlinck :

them, than are the men. "I only smell the smell of the earth," 'reiterates the First Blind Man. But the Young Blind Woman repeats in varying terms and with increasing emphasis, "I smell a scent of flowers round about us."

In passing, it may be noted, as in some sense a justification of the conduct of the priest of which the men complained—I mean his conduct in appealing most of all to the women when the time of crisis arose—that he well may have felt not only that it was an easier task to reach their emotions than it would be to reach the intellect of the men, but that there was more to be hoped for from the perceptions with which the women were gifted.

In the study of the symbolism of this play the references to the flowers are important, as are also the references, not less frequent, to the dead leaves. The budding and fructification of a tree are familiar images of the spiritual birth or rebirth of Man. Observe that the dead leaves soon are made to whirl and fly in

“The Sightless”

the tempest which breaks over the blind people. For the old beliefs are being driven away and are passing to utter decay. In the flowers of which the Young Blind Woman smells the scent we have the promise of a new and beauteous faith and of new fruits of life. “I have just smelt flowers on the wind,” cries also the Oldest Blind Woman. And the Oldest Blind Man declares, “I think that the women are right.”

The flowers are strange, pale daffodils—flowers neither rich nor rare, yet flowers of Spring, harbingers of Summer glories. Of them Shakespeare wrote in *The Winter's Tale*:

Daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty.

That the daffodils described by Maeterlinck have but little beauty; that they are “strange” and “pale,” is not a matter for wonder. How else but strange and pale must be the flowers of which in their then low spiritual state these sightless people can be conscious?

On Maeterlinck :

Happily, when at length the Sixth Blind Man, having reached the flowers, picks up a few and offers them to the Young Blind Woman, a notable event is recorded. "The night-birds fly away."

IV

Of all times in the life of humanity none seem so full of peril as those periods of transition when a long-cherished faith having lost its power a new one has not yet been attained. This is borne in upon us vividly by the author's treatment of his theme. "The wind rises in the forest and the sea roars suddenly and with violence." The cold becomes intense. The blind people are more than ever troubled.

A big dog enters on the scene. I have said that in times of crisis such as the condition of these sightless people represents men are thrown back on their powers of intuition and their primary instincts. These powers and instincts have been manifest subjectively in the

“The Sightless”

finer perceptions which the women display. Objectively the author represents them by the dog. He makes use of the dog with similar symbolical significance in his later work, *The Blue Bird*.

There are two respects in which the instincts of the dog are pre-eminent—in the sense of locality and in the apprehension of the presence of death. The dog of this play represents both of these forms of instinct, but notably the one last named. The First Blind Man, who had all along been the most timorous and stupid of the company, is dragged by the dog towards the motionless priest, of whose death the blind people now first become conscious. The pitiable condition to which they have come is then more than ever realised. And, proportionately, their sense of need is greatest. The prayer of the soul goes forth, a prayer which when sincere and heartfelt is ever sure of answer. The Young Blind Woman remarks that she has been putting her hands to her eyes; she thought that she “was going to see.” By and by the

On 'Maeterlinck :

Oldest Blind Man declares that he can hear a noise, though it is one that he cannot well make out. The Young Blind Woman, now more positive, declares, "I hear someone walking in the distance."

The Mad Woman's child begins to wail suddenly in the dark, "It sees. It sees," exclaims the Young Blind Woman. "It must see something, as it is crying." And seizing the child in her arms the Young Blind Woman rushes forward in the direction of the sound, the other women following.

The sound of the footsteps symbolises the coming of the herald of a new faith.

Why should there be a woman described as mad in this strange company, and why should it be her child that thus displays a ready sense of the herald's presence? This woman may have been one of those ecstatic and highly wrought devotees on whom a crisis tells most heavily; she may have loved much and suffered overmuch in relation to the Church in which she no longer finds shelter. We do not know. But of the significance of her

“The Sightless”

child we can have no doubt. The child whom the Young Blind Woman lifts above the group of the sightless and in whose vision she has such confidence is the type of the innocence which is the necessary condition of spiritual perception. For, truly, “He hath hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them unto babes.”

“The footsteps have stopped right among us,” cries the Young Blind Woman. And with the pathetic prayer of the Oldest Blind Woman, “Have pity on us,” the play ends.

V

“We have never seen each other. We question each other, and we answer each other ; we live together, and we are always together. But we know not what we are.”

So says the Oldest Blind Man in the time of doubt and difficulty which precedes the hearing of the mystic footsteps. These words, so exquisite in their tender-

On Maeterlinck :

ness and pathos, express that sense of ignorance, of weakness, and of isolation, and that consciousness of the need of communion which all men feel when the greater problems of life are borne in upon them and seem to baffle all attempts at solution. In *The Sightless* from beginning to end the dependence of men on one another is exemplified. But still more is exemplified the need for the establishment of a conscious and orderly relationship with the Supreme Source of life, of a sympathetic association of Man with those Divine forces from which his being is derived and by which it is sustained. •

By diverse means and in diverse forms men in different ages and in different places have sought to establish this relationship. Hence religious systems have arisen. But no one system can for ever satisfy the needs of mind and heart. Religions are not exempt from the processes and conditions of decay, death, new birth and growth to which all forms of life are subject, however constant may be the laws which determine those processes, which regulate

“The Sightless”

these conditions. And, inevitably, the time of transition is a time of tragic incidents. Maeterlinck spares no resource of his art in placing this fact figuratively before us.

But if the picture which Maeterlinck draws is sombre, it is not pessimistic. Man's need of some form of positive faith is emphasised with the utmost force in the work which we have been considering. And in the indication which the author gives of his conviction that provision for meeting that need will come as surely as the need is felt we have the best possible evidence of his optimism. This play is, indeed, true of insight, wisely philosophic. It is full of suggestive thoughts. And, as I said at the outset, the way in which those thoughts are expressed and the whole character of the work mark *The Sightless* as a piece of the finest art.

Maeterlinck's Symbolism:

The Blue Bird and other Essays

BY

Henry Rose

Foolscap 8vo, 106 pages. Wrappers, 1s. net, postage 1½d.

Quarter Cloth, gilt top, 2s. net, postage 2½d.

"Mr. Rose provides an hour of pleasant speculation for sympathetic minds."—*Morning Post*.

"The three essays in this book are well worth reading. The style is excellent."—*Great Thoughts*.

"A thoughtful study of Maeterlinck's symbolism leading up to an interpretation of the ultimate meaning of 'The Blue Bird.'"—*The Scotsman*.

"Worthy of a high place among the series of contributions to advanced thought which Mr. Fifield has been publishing for some years past."—*Sunday Times*.

"Mr. Rose is well equipped for his task. . . . His essay, a model of interpretative lucidity, may be commended to all who have either seen or read the most fascinating play ever put on the stage."—*Oxford Chronicle*.

"An able and suggestive essay expounding in detail the symbolism of Maeterlinck's fascinating allegory. In it the author carries us far beyond the rough-and-ready explanations of the play-bill. . . . We commend this little volume to all lovers of 'The Blue Bird.'"—*The Quest* (the quarterly magazine of the Quest Society).

"A subtle and very reliable analysis of the inner meaning of Maeterlinck's fascinating play. It will be found very useful in confirming or correcting the varying interpretations by those who have not seen the drama, and in enhancing the pleasure of those who have yet to see it."—*Glasgow Herald*.

MAETERLINCK'S SYMBOLISM (*continued*)

“‘The Blue Bird’ has, Mr. Rose convinces us, a definite and consistent meaning, and he has written this excellent booklet for the purpose of assisting the reader to interpret Maeterlinck’s wonderful symbolical play.”

Dundee Advertiser.

“We are led to wonder whether the Belgian philosopher is aware of all the depth of meaning in his charming play which Mr. Rose has been able to evolve therefrom. Not that the latter ever seems to strain after a meaning that is not obvious to every one—after it has been pointed out. The meaning is there, the teaching is there.”

Morning Light.

“Mr. Rose’s essay on the symbolism of ‘The Blue Bird’ is the most complete and the best that I have read.”

Mr. MEREDITH STARR in *The Occult Review*.

“Mr. Rose makes a good case for his theory of the symbolism of the play.”—*Aberdeen Daily Journal*.

“A lucid interpretation of the symbolism of ‘The Blue Bird.’”—*Irish Independent*.

“A very helpful little book . . . highly instructive.”

Yorkshire Post.

“Mr. Rose’s essays are very suggestive.”

Christian Commonwealth.

“The essays are helpful.”—*Sheffield Independent*.

“A pleasant little book.”—*Aberdeen Free Press*.

London : A. C. Fifield, 13 Clifford’s Inn, E.C.

May be ordered of any bookseller.

842.91/ROS



